

B & O Railroad, Keyser Machine Shop
Keyser Vicinity
Mineral County
West Virginia

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA
PHOTOGRAPHS

Historic American Engineering Record
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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

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BALTIMORE AND OHIO RAILROAD, KEYSER MACHINE SHOP

Date: Circa 1875

Location: Keyser Vicinity, Mineral County,
West Virginia

Owner: Originally: B & O Railroad
Presently: Chessie System

Significance: The machine shop at Keyser is a representative
example of mid-19th century timber truss
construction.

Transmitted by: Dan Clement, 1984

Historian: Dennis Zemballa

By the end of the 1870's the B & O Railroad was experiencing a rapid expansion of traffic from west of the Ohio River and the coal regions of northern West Virginia. The Railroad was in need of establishing additional shipping and repair facilities and freight yards. Such a facility was built at Keyser, West Virginia.

At first observation, it seems strange that the B & O would build substantially at Keyser. Since the early 1800's, the railroad had had large divisional shops at Piedmont, only six miles west. Prior to the Civil War, these shops consisted of two small 16 stall roundhouses, designed by Latrobe and Fink [1], and in between, a large machine shop.[2] These buildings were destroyed during the war, but were rebuilt later in the 1860's. The new buildings consisted again of a pair of round houses separated by a large machine shop. The new round houses were the same roofed turntable variety that existed before the war and were identical to the two built at Martinsburg. However these shops at Piedmont were on a very restricted site, "...a flat of limited extent ...",[4] and expanded facilities, including the needed freight yards and stockyards could not be accommodated there.

But at New Creek there was "... a beautiful plain of a mile or more in length..."[5] that was ideally topographically suited and available for development. In 1874, New Creek station was platted and named Keyser, after the then vice president of the B & O, William Keyser.[6] The buildings and yards then built at Keyser were maintained together with those at Piedmont.

The Keyser buildings today consist of a large brick walled and heavy timber trussed machine forge or shop, typical of the economical forms that had been evolved by American railroads after the Civil War; a large framed shed that may have been a car shop or engine house; and a freight house. Dates of these structures have not been firmly established, but the machine shop, at least, appears to be mid-1870's.

At Piedmont, no trace remains of the shop complex, the site today is an empty plot. Although the date of this demolition has not been established, it may have been shortly after 1916 when the new shops at South Cumberland were opened. The old shops at both Piedmont and Martinsburg were superseded by the Cumberland shops for locomotive maintenance and repair. Because of the proximity of the Keyser complex, the fine Piedmont buildings were not preserved for other uses as were those at Martinsburg.

The question remains, why didn't the B & O locate the Piedmont shops at Keyser in the first place? The main reason was the nearby location of the iron ore and coal deposits of the Cumberland basin. Branch railroads from these Maryland mines were quickly built by the mining companies to connect with Piedmont. Thus Piedmont was an early freight generating junction. Piedmont was also the eastern terminus of the grades of the Allegheny summit necessitating the location of helper engines there [7] (Grafton performed a similar function west of the summit). The future need for a level area the size of that at New Creek was not foreseen in 1851.

FOOTNOTES

1. A History & Description of the B&O RR by a Citizen of Balto., 1853, p. 108.
2. The Book of the Great Railway Celebrations of 1857 by Wm. Prescott Smith, 1858, illus., Part I, following p. 160.
3. The Baltimore & Ohio Railroad and Its Branches, from the Lakes to the Sea, 1872, folio, photograph #3864.
4. A History & Description of the B&O RR by a Citizen of Balto., 1853, p. 108.
5. loc cit.
6. Letter from Chas. A. Bonar (Mineral Co, Historical Soc.) to G.C. Totty (B&O RR Co.), Sept. 9, 1972, p. 1.
7. The Story of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad by Edward Hunderford, 1927, Vol. I, p. 255.